

## COMMUNICATION IN SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS - CASE STUDY RAPANUI CLOTHING

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to make an analysis of the importance of communication in the success and dissemination of brands, specifically in the sustainable fashion brands, observing how communication works in the dissemination of sustainability and how it can be an advantage for brands, working as a strong element of their communication strategies. Thus issues related to sustainability in fashion and the appearance of sustainable fashion brands, trying to realize which are their dynamics, are addressed here. It is also studied the importance of communication, how it acts in the promotion of the brand image and its relationship with the target audience, making the audience to realize its sustainable fashion practices. The investigation methodology used in the research consists of an analysis of tools/media communication used by sustainable fashion brand Rapanui Clothing, trying to understand whether the brand effectively communicates its sustainability.*

**Key Words:** Brands, fashion, sustainability, communication.

### 1. Introduction

Inserted in a context where the issues related to environmental degradation and social problems increasingly affect people's lives, such that became a concern not only of the governments, but also of the society itself for some years. In this scenario, observing a new behavior of society, which demands greater social and environmental responsibility by business, many of them are adapting, trying to incorporate more sustainable practices; others appear with sustainability practices inserted in their own concept, such as the case of sustainable fashion brands. These brands, that despite integrate an industry in which is predominant the encouragement of consumption and harmful practices to the environment; they note the need of the industry adjustment; result of the emergence of a new market demand, where begin to appear more conscious and responsible consumers, that prefer to buy products from ethically correct brands.

Thus, sustainability starts to be a part of fashion; even strong brands in the industry also try to integrate sustainable practices in their production. It can be said that the media and environmental actions have an essential role in this, as they contribute to publicize the sustainability issue among the population. Still, it is noted the existence of a gap between the sustainable fashion brands and the public, which often does not know what "sustainability", "being green" means, or simply do not know sustainable fashion brands. Therefore, it can be highlighted the importance of communication for the promotion of these brands, making reach the consumer both the brand image, as the concept of sustainability.

Therefore, this paper is the result of the research carried out along the Master in Fashion Communication Design, which had as one of the goals develop a research with an emphasis on communication of sustainable fashion brands, and as one of the case studies the brand Rapanui Clothing. So, trying to realize that communication strategies Rapanui Clothing uses to reach its target audience. Thus, this article aims to

answer the following question: Which communication strategies sustainable fashion brand Rapanui Clothing is using to reach its target audience and disseminate its concepts of sustainability? In order to answer this question, a brief reflection on sustainability in fashion and sustainable fashion brands will be presented, as well as the importance of communication in the promotion and knowledge that people have about the brands. Next will be done an empirical analysis of the communication strategies used by the Rapanui Clothing, which is the case study of this work.

## 2. Sustainability in fashion and the sustainable fashion brands

The fashion industry has a central role in social life since, among the goods we consume, clothes and accessories accompany all our lives and our way of being socially. It is a system characterized by encouraging consumption and fast disposal, where fashion follows trends, which lead to a programmed life cycle that imposes fast and early disposal of products, whether these are or not in good condition, but leave "being fashionable". The accessibility of fashion, provided by the new technologies and globalization also contributes to stimulate consumption, where we observe the speed with which new trends arrive in stores and information reaches consumers, who are increasingly encouraged to consume (Refosco *et al.*, 2011).

The fashion industry in all its production stages involves the expense of natural resources. The fashion system may involve, for example, from the "production and planting seeds for obtaining raw materials of textile substrates to millions of workers and their various functions in different countries of the world" (Berlim, 2012, p.26). That is, it is noted the predominance of a fashion system harmful to the environment (through exhaustion of soil for example) and the well-being of the people involved in the process, where many of the brands prefer to produce in countries with weak labor laws and poor working conditions. The environmental impacts are related to energy consumption, use of toxic products (linked to cotton production), water consumption, and effluents production by chemical, generation of solid waste and damage to the soil and water (Berlim, 2012). In this context, the fashion industry eventually causes social and environmental negative impacts.

It is precisely because of such damage caused by the fashion industry that there is a need to think in a sustainable fashion that takes into account the principles of sustainable development, thinking about the environmental and social issues. Thus, in a predominantly harmful system, begin to emerge concrete actions, either through recycling, reuse and reduction; or the use of organic cotton, ecological printing and dyeing, use of "vegetable leather"; besides practices related to social aspects, worrying about the well-being and human rights of both their direct employees as well as suppliers. Therefore, sustainable fashion concept should incorporate, in addition to environmental aspects, social and economic too; not limited to produce in a more environmentally friendly way, but worrying about things like working conditions and manpower used by the industry.

At the same time, It can also be mentioned the appearance of a new type of consumer who is more alert and informed; that looks for products to live better and identifies itself with issues linked to well-being, quality of life, social responsibility, happiness, freedom, environment, among others (Valente, 2008). In the literature, these individuals are referred to as *LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability)*, which would be people with healthy lifestyles and focus on sustainability. These adopt a lifestyle based on health and the physical, social and well-being. It can be said that the consumer is a social actor in the consumption of sustainable fashion brands and that education and knowledge are the mainly responsible in its behavior change (Morais *et al.*, 2011).

The new consumer has questions and new values, seeking different ways to consume fashion products (Rech & Souza, 2009); he demands greater social and environmental responsibility of brands. This change of consciousness in the population makes that companies start to worry about incorporating processes that contribute to sustainable development to preserve the environment. In this context, begins to appear sustainable fashion brands geared specifically for sustainability globally, where the sustainability is part of

the brand concept itself. Brands care about both social aspects, as well as environmental and economic aspects. Not only ecological factors of production, but also the working conditions of people involved in the process, as is the case of Rapanui Clothing, object of study of this work.

Despite of this new consumer, it is noticed that there is a gap between sustainable fashion and consumers, since in fashion many still do not realize the relationship of their consumption habits with their personal gain, do not understand the impact on the environment through their choices, or simply, have little information on sustainability in fashion and existing sustainable fashion brands. It is perceived that for a profound change in the fashion system is required the joint attitude of new design proposals, which make products with a long life cycle, as well as educational movements in order to raise public awareness and build a consumer conscious (Refosco *et al.* 2011). Not to mention the role of communication in awareness, working in the dissemination of sustainable fashion brands and concepts of sustainability.

### 3. The brand communication

Currently, communication plays a central role in social life. The technological development of the past few years contributed so that access to information has become faster, in which anywhere in the world you can stay informed, you only need to be connected to the Internet. In this context, people also began to take a more active role, increasingly involved and informed, no longer being just "consumers" of information, and also being producers. In the scope of brands, they realized the importance of having a corporate communication system strategically organized for their survival and development, where the communication is an essential part for placing the brand in the market, guiding them and promoting dialogue with their target audiences, which is essential to boost the brand strategy so that it becomes strong and recognized (Macedo, 2012, p.08).

The brands realize the importance that communication has in their dissemination and start to invest in this way, since it is mainly through communication that consumers get to know the brands and their products, its identity and concept. Ruão sustains the importance of communication for a brand to become known and reach its audience. For the author, the communication is necessary for the survival of the brand without it consumers would not know of its existence (Ruão, 2000, p.11).

For Vásquez, there are two reasons influencing the consumer in purchasing the product of a particular brand. First, because it transmits some sensations and he identifies with it. The second is related to something that consumers aspire in terms of image, something he does not have and the brand can provide. In this sense, the essence of the brand goes through meaning, values, lifestyle and concept. Here it can be pointed out the importance of communication in building the image and promoting a brand (Vásquez, 2007).

The communication should be based on brand identity and aims to build an image relating to the identity, in other words, it acts as a transmission mechanism, "which acts as a transforming element or a encoder of the message into identity, and creator of the necessary conditions for distribution to target audiences (Vásquez, 2007, p.207). Therefore, sustainable fashion brands should make reaches the public its identity, its concept, which has its own sustainability built into it. They should set an effective communication strategy in order to survive and stand out in the competitive market, these strategies must take into account a number of variables related to the organization itself, determining objectives and available resources; with the target audience, it is essential to know who they are and what they think of the company; and the message, by which means it will be sent and how it is structured (Argenti, 1998).

At the same time, it can be addressed the importance of sustainability in corporate communication. Sustainability is "fashionable" and several brands have already noticed this, they use the concept as a marketing tool, where in recent years there is a growing "green" wave. Sustainability is "fashionable" and several brands have already noticed this, they use the concept as a marketing tool, where in recent years there is a growing "green" wave. It ultimately add value to the company, since, as already mentioned, the issue is highlighted and people demand more and more social and environmental responsibility of the

companies. Thus, the fact that the companies are truly concerned with the issue, and have in their policy the sustainability practices, is an excellent strength to be enhanced in communication.

#### 4. Methodology

This article is based on a research on the communication of sustainable fashion brands, using as a case study the British brand Rapanui Clothing. The brand was selected through a preliminary assessment made for a dissertation research during the Master in Fashion Communication Design; and, through well-defined sustainability criteria, it was concluded that Rapanui Clothing is a sustainable fashion brand. (Araújo, 2014).

For the development of the investigation, it was decided to initially make a literature review on the subject, which analyzed books and papers on the subject and that were part of the state of the art of this study. Secondly, to analyze the brand communication of Rapanui Clothing, an analysis grid of tools/media communication was developed to try to realize how the Rapanui Clothing communicates their products and possible failures in this communication. The analysis was done with the assistance of information collected online, through the website, blog and social networks.

The grid development was based on the communication mix established by Morais (2011). According to the author, communication is a strategic element of the brand and fundamental part for the creation and transmission of image and its personality. Thus, companies must communicate through an integrated communication process that uses various communication elements. Accordingly, the grid (table 1) is divided into 6 areas based on communication mix for fashion brands: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, Internet and other (shows, catalogs, showrooms, etc.) (Morais, 2011). All elements are important means for communication of a fashion brand and hence for sustainable fashion brands.

In this sense, the advertising would be a paid form of communication used by the brand to advertise their products and services or the organization itself. Here it is intended to realize if the selected brand advertises in newspapers, magazines or other means. The sales promotion is focused on action to intensify the increase in sales (Morais J. , 2011). In this study, the goal is to see if the brand makes sales, discounts (using cards, coupons, etc.) and samples, which are the product offerings.

Moreover, direct marketing is a method based on the individual customer records in a database that brands have. It can be done via direct mail, which is the custom shipping materials through letters, catalogs, brochures, among others; or e-mail or text messages, which is done by using e-mails or phones.

Another point to be evaluated is the tools based on the Internet, which occupy an essential role in the communication of current fashion brands. Therefore, this paper will try to realize if the selected brand has website and its own blog; if is present in social media such as Facebook, twitter, among others; if uses newsletter, that would be an electronic mail about the brand; and other tools related to the brand.

In parameter "other" from Table 1, is intended to assess whether the sustainable fashion brand participates in fashion shows, fashion fairs, if it has showroom (where you display the collection to clients and journalists promoting the brand) and has catalogs.

The public relations tool is considered one of the most effective in communicating fashion brands; here the tools evaluated were *publicity*, *endorsement* and *product placement*. The first is a non-personal communication of the company, which is not directly paid or has sponsor identification, may appear in the form of news, editorial or advertisement. In the case of fashion brands can be when the brand appears in reports or a celebrity is wearing something of the brand. When important people related to the brand appear in the media or even when journalists write about the brand spontaneously (Morais J. , 2011). The endorsement is related to the sponsorship of celebrities, dressing them. The product placement is the linking of products in films, novels, and series, among others.

**Table 1:** Communication Analysis. Source: Araújo, 2014.

Tools/Media of Brand communication		Yes	No
Advertising	Newspaper		X
	Magazine		X
	Other		X
Sales Promotion	Sales		X
	Discounts	X	
	Samples	X	
Public Relations	<i>Publicity</i>	X	
	<i>Endorsement</i>		X
	<i>Product Placement</i>		X
Direct Marketing	Direct Mail		X
	Electronic Mail or <i>text messages</i>		X
Internet	<i>Site</i>	X	
	Social Media	X	
	<i>Blog</i>	X	
	<i>Newsletter</i>	X	
	Outros	X	
Others	Catalogs	X	
	Fashion Shows		X
	Fashion Fairs		X
	<i>Showroom</i>		X

The arrangement of the communication grid (Table 1) is simple, as its fill, and based on the principle of the presence or absence of these media and tools for the brand. The "no" in the table characterizes that the brand does not have the tools or the information was not found and the "yes", that they are present.

## 5. Analysis of results

The brand that served as a case study for this work is the Rapanui Clothing. It was launched in 2009, the Isle of Wight, England. It is male and female casual ecological Clothing brand, that sells t-shirts, sweatshirts, socks and bags; all parts are made with organic and recyclable materials in an ethically accredited factory, which uses wind power in India. The pieces are handmade finished in the factory located in England. Furthermore, the Rapanui Clothing is considered a sustainable fashion brand because it incorporates in its own concept concern for environmental and social issues, applying aspects such as concern for human rights, which defends an ethical position in relation to all the people involved with the brand, even with its suppliers, working only with suppliers that comply with the practices that the company stands for and with the concern to inform consumers about the origin of their products. It also has as a principle contributing to the development of the local economy and job creation. It is involved in causes of social nature, producing collections where the sales revert to social causes, such as helping homeless people. In the environmental context, the brand only uses organic cotton developed a low-waste printer to print the clothes and uses

wind energy in its factories (Clothing, 2009). These are some of the characteristics that make Rapanui Clothing a sustainable fashion brand. It can also be pointed out that Rapanui provides online information related to its concept and its sustainable practices, managing to convey to the audience that it is a fashion brand with sustainable concerns, even if this transmission is not made in an systematized and educational way.

By observing the communication tools used by the Rapanui, it was found some difficulties to be aware of all the tools/media that the brand uses in its communication. The information is dispersed and the analysis was made using information collected in the internet on site, blogs and social media of the brand, it was not possible to find all media and tools that Rapanui Clothing uses and when contacted the brand did not show availability to be interviewed during this investigation.

Table 1 shows the analysis of the brand communication. Regarding advertising, it was not found any information about tools used by the brand.

In sales promotion, there was no reference on sales verified. But it was found that the brand uses discounts as a way to increase sales, which signs the Rapanui's newsletter can access discount vouchers. The brand also offers samples, which makes purchases worth more than £15, get a pair of socks and has free delivery.

In the analysis of public relations, it is clear that the brand uses publicity as a communication strategy. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of this form of public relations used by the brand. The first is the image of the brand's founder interview in the CNBC television channel that covers business news; and the second one, the visit of Countess Sophie Wessex<sup>1</sup> to the Rapanui's headquarters, in which she met the brand's founders of the brand, which made headlines in Britain's Daily Mail. No information was found on the endorsement and product placement. The same happened in relation to direct marketing, where it was not possible to verify if the brand uses this tool.



**Figure 1:** Interview in CBNC. Source: Clothing, 2009.

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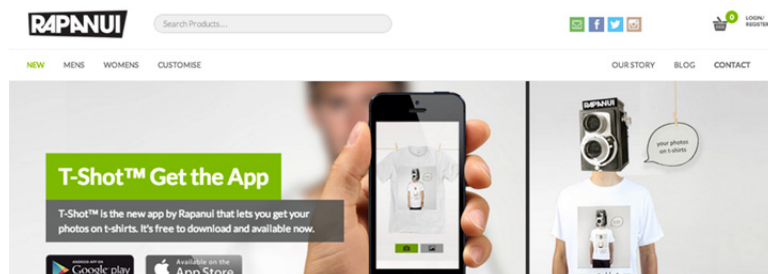
<sup>1</sup> Wessex was one of the seven major Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that preceded the Kingdom of England.

After accepting a posy packed with seasonal hyacinths from a six-year-old pupil, the Countess was whisked off to visit ethical fashion label Rapanui at their headquarters in nearby Sandown Bay. There she met the company's two new apprentices as well as founders Rob Drake-Knight and Martin Drake-Knight, who gave her a tour of the premises. The company specialises in organic casualwear, all of which is manufactured in ethically-approved factories powered by wind and solar power.



**Figure 2:** Visit of Countess of Wessex to the Rapanui's headquarters. Source: Styles, 2014.

The Rapanui has a strong presence in the media connected to the Internet; it has its own site (Figure 3), where it is possible to gather a lot of information about its history, products, and relationship to sustainability, etc.



**Figure 3 -** Rapanui brand's site. Source: Clothing, 2009.

It also has a strong presence on social media. Rapanui Clothing has Facebook page, which is updated regularly, and in which transmits the news related to the brand, keeping in touch with its audience. Besides having profiles on Twitter, Instagram, Google+ and Pinterest, it has its own blog and newspaper, that has a printed and online version. Another point that could be verified is that the brand has a catalog, in which shows its products. But no information was found on the participation in fairs, fashion shows or showrooms.

## 6. Conclusion

By analyzing the tools/media communication used by the Rapanui, it is perceived that this fashion brand can further explore the communication strategies that are used, such as advertising of brand promotion and promoting sales/discounts to encourage consumption. Additionally, a greater effort can be made on the part of public relations, which is one of the most effective ways of fashion brands to promote themselves; the investment in direct marketing; or even the participation in (sustainable) fashion fairs, which is a great opportunity to showcase the brand to industry professionals.

However, and although much can still be improved, the Rapanui already invests heavily in the use social media in their promotion, which is an advantage, since a brand that wants to survive in the current market must have a strong presence in social media and new media. The use of tools connected to the Internet contributes to the brand to become known and to get closer with their target audience.

Thus can be stated that the Rapanui, after all, has a good communication policy, and it is clear that it is achieving to transmit to its target audience its values as a sustainable fashion brand, the concepts that defends and the way how it contributes to sustainability. In this sense, it can be said that to be a sustainable fashion brand, Rapanui Clothing must prioritize the communication of sustainability, and should even have a clear and educational role next to its audience, since sustainability is a growing concern by part

of society. Making of this flag (sustainability) a differential for the brand, which is a powerful communication tool, contributing to the company become competitive and certainly more economically sustainable.

## Acknowledgements

This work is financed by FEDER funds through the Competitiveness Factors Operational Programme - COMPETE and by national funds through FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology within the scope of the project POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007136.



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